

The Lessons We Learn by ReaderOfShadows

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Summary: Mike Wheeler learns a lot in late 1983; that some friendships can survive being separated by dimensions. That there is girl with saddest eyes and gentlest smile he wishes to protect. That being a hero comes with a price. And most of all, he learns about grief.

The Lessons We Learn

A/N: This is my first attempt to venture into Stranger Things fandom, because I have a LOT of feelings about season 2. Especially about Eleven and Mike whose emotional validity I really want to defend. (I swear I wasn't that much of an angst teen, really...) Besides, I really feel like he is amazingly faithful/positive character, though in different manner than Dustin.

Maybe there will be more, especially exploring this, if I can deal with the writing process. Anyway, enjoy!

Mike Wheeler learns a lot in late 1983.

He learns that a place where Dungeons & Dragons campaigns become true is a lot more scary than exciting. He learns the fear and tears of a hero who saves the day, despite the bitter price.

He discovers his sister is a lot more badass than he thought and also a much better confidant. That friendships can be tested by fiercest arguments and literal monsters, yet emerge stronger, save lives. And cost them, too.

Mike learns that not all girls are annoying or boring. He finds one in particular who is magical in every imaginable way, someone who understands even when he cannot find words (and she isn't very good with those, to be honest). Someone with a gentlest smile and saddest eyes he has ever seen. Someone who trusts him completely, though she is the one to save him. All of them, more than once.

He learns grief.

It is not as if he had not encountered death before - Mike vaguely recalls crying at his grandma's funeral, but he had been so young then that the memory of her and missing her have all but disappeared from his mind. And when Will disappeared, the thought obviously came to his mind, he simply could not accept it, not entirely. Not even at his best friend's funeral.

This time it is different.

It creeps on him gradually, a little more tangible each day, carving a hole in his chest with patience of a methodical maniac. He pretends it is not there, feels that facing it would mean betrayal. And betraying Eleven is something he can never do.

But it hurts, more and more each time he thinks of a new word he could teach her or the way her eyes would light up something she has never seen before. His mom doesn't understand why he suddenly stops eating Eggos and Nancy's sympathetic gaze only makes a new ache branch through his chest.

Sometimes, he wishes he had someone to talk it out with. But it feels near impossible, when they cannot safely mention her outside house, when Lucas still gets antsy with guilt and Dustin's eagerness to exaggerate paints Eleven as invincible superhero that could take on Thanos if needed.

And Will? Mike does not like to bring up that week up with him, to see the haunted look pass over his friend's face. But as months pass and he gets worse at hiding the hurt, Will asks him to tell about El and listens quietly, intently, as if he stared at one point hard enough, he could summon an image of her.

Perhaps that is what wounds him the most - the way Mike could swear a glimpse of her, echo of her voice is teetering on the edge of his sense. Her presence just never left, it lingers between his shoulderblades, slightly cool and soothing at the same time. It makes grieving even more of a crime - how can he say she is gone, forever, if she feels just one ripple in reality, one breath away?

So Mike speaks to her, sometimes for a minute, sometimes for an hour. But every day, without a fail. Now and then, Nancy finds him asleep and curled up in the blanket fort, clutching the walkie-talkie with unyielding grip.

One particular night, he refuses to go to bed at her prompting and she settles down next to him, careful to not the topple 'roof' over. They sit in silence, Mike glaring a hole in opposite wall, until Nancy coughs and speaks up.

"Barb... They couldn't bring her back, you know."

Mike knows. But he also knows that *knowing* and speaking about it are two different things. He doesn't interrupt Nance who has never brought this up before, watches her hands clench and unclench in her lap.

"Sometimes, I wonder, what if... What if she was like Will. What if there was a chance. I know Hopper said that..."

He shifts closer to her, hesitates, then awkwardly puts arm around her hunched shoulders that are trembling slightly. They sit like that for a short while, before Nancy straightens up and he withdraws, half expecting her to leave now, but she surprises him for second time that night.

"What I *do* know is that Eleven is smart. And strong. If anyone has a chance to survive down there and escape, it is her. So, don't lose hope. You never did during that awful time, making us all believe along with you - don't do it now."

Now it is his turn to blink rapidly as tears well in his eyes, any response lost between ragged breaths. So, they silently stay in the blanket fort, shoulder to shoulder, until mom shout that if they're not in bed within ten minutes, there will be consequences.

It is the closest he has felt to comforted in months.

And though he would never admit it, Mike holds onto her words when his faith starts to turn into black dust on verge to be blown away by grief's cold breath. They remind him of another lesson he has learned: hope, the kind that makes the impossible possible. He has already seen it bring back Will, why can't it happen again?

But what he does not realize is that the way he holds onto hope, no matter the circumstances, despite how it hurts, is perhaps the very thing that makes it reality.